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ABSTRACT

Translating theory to practice is a major challenge for beginning teachers. An experiment was conducted to help preservice teachers meet this challenge by enhancing their capability to cope with the complexity of the classroom environment through the use of case method during their field experiences. Study participants were seven student teachers in elementary grades. After reading and analyzing several published case reports, the students were required to develop their own cases describing an incident they experienced, discussing the rationale behind their actions, and outlining issues still unresolved. The themes that emerged from the students' case reports reflected several common concerns of student teachers: (1) working with learning disabled students in the classroom; (2) disciplining students; (3) involving parents; (4) dealing with the cooperating teacher; (5) exploring effective teaching strategies; and (6) moral responsibility. While students were not always able to find answers to the problems they encountered, they did engage in productive reflective thinking. It is recommended that use of the case method should begin at the outset of the teacher education program to help students develop the ability to analyze and write their own cases. (Excerpts from several case reports are included.) (ND)

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Recapturing the essence of teacher education: preservice teachers using case studies to think like a teacher

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Recapturing the essence of teacher education: preservice teachers using case studies to think like a teacher

> "As a teacher, when you take the time to reflect on the dilemmas in your classroom---pondering what went right, what went wrong, and what still bothers you about the situation--you will find that you are better able to handle the next dilemma that you face. Like wise, when you are able to discuss your concerns with other educators in a rational and nonthreatening manner, you become increasingly astute at handling some of the more perplexing conditions that you face in the classroom. The more experience you gain in the classroom, the easier your decision making will become" (Huyvaert, 1995, p. 1).

Introduction

The learning and application of theories and principals taught in the teacher education programs is a big challenge to preservice teachers who are lack of classroom experiences. Oftentimes the faculty wishes that the students will somehow automatically transfer the knowledge to practice when they go to the field. It is assumed that preservice teachers "will learn facts, concepts, principles, and theories related to teaching and will draw on that knowledge as needed when teaching" (Cooper & McNergney, 1995, p. 1). Research has found that preservice teachers' confidence level is quite high before their going to the field. However, at the beginning of each semester, it is not surprising to hear John and Mary quit their student teaching because they find that they are incapable of handling the pressure in the classroom. Even those who struggle through their field experience realize that they do not have the mindset for teaching today's children. What can teacher educators do to help preservice teachers walk through the difficult transferring process? In

other words, what can we do to help change their mindset from a student to a teacher?

Based on literature review, I have found that case methods can become very useful tools for linking preservice teachers to the subject matter, the context, the student, and the teacher. Reading, analyzing, and reflecting others' dilemmas can prepare them to think like a teacher, according to Kleinfeld (1992). Schon(1987) points out that cases help people to "reframe" problems and consider various strategies and their possible consequences. In responding to the cases, student teachers are able to put themselves in a teacher's position and experience those problems they are likely to encounter in the classrooms. The cases also enable them to examine their own educational assumptions and make rational decisions. Consequently, cases help them see the connection between educational theory and teaching realities.

Drawing on Schon's work, MacKinnon(1987) finds that when preservice teachers are guided through "a cycle of reflection" consisting of problem setting, reframing, and resolution, they become reflective in the analysis of their own teaching. Since dilemmas or issues are always the essential component of cases, the case methods can serve that purpose for preservice teachers to rethink the problem from multiple perspectives, reason alternative actions with theories and predict the consequences (Silverman, Welty, & Lyon, 1994).

Moreover, the case methods strongly embed in the constructivist paradigm that, through constantly interacting with "objects, people, rules, norms and ideas," reflective teachers are able to construct and reconstruct their own knowledge. That is to say, they "learn from their experiences by constructing mental representations of their personal meanings which are stored in memory to be revised as experience dictates" (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993, pp. 45-46). Case methods bring this opportunity of interaction to preservice teachers at no risk of their worrying about making a bad decision to affect their students. Ultimately, through "reframing" and "new action"(Schon, 1987), it " . . . may help students forge connections between knowledge and practice, and in doing so, revitalize the pedagogy of teacher education programs" (Cooper & McNergney, p. 2).

While a quite substantial body of research has focused on using case studies to enhance reflective thinking ability of preservice teachers, little effort has been made to encourage them to learn to develop their own cases. I believe that in an effort to " . . . discover the sense in someone else's practice", student teachers will have a strong desire to learn to "question their own (practice)" (Schon, 1991, p. 5).

This paper presents an experiment on how we can use the case methods as a vehicle to assist preservice teachers to transfer what they have acquired to practice. It particularly describes the process that a group of preservice teachers learn to enhance their capability to cope with the complexity of the classroom

environment via case studies reading and writing during their field experience.

Procedures

There were seven preservice teachers doing their student teaching in an elementary school. They were respectively assigned to first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade and sixth grade classrooms. They had never been exposed to the case studies before.

To orient them to the method, I used a book called "Reports from the classroom: Cases for reflection" by Sarah Huyvaert. The reasons to select this book were that all the cases were written by the classroom teachers who went through the situations and made their decisions based on their knowledge of teaching, which made it psychologically appeal to the student teachers; that different perspectives were provided after each case report by either classroom teachers, university professors, or administrative, which showed the student teachers how to explore a problem from a different perspective. Due to the time restriction, only three cases were selected from the book for them to respond. They had to do it without reading others' commentaries presented after each case. The three cases respectively described the dilemmas of disruptive children, children of special needs, and classroom management. Three two-hour reflective seminars provided them the opportunity to share each other's thoughts about the cases and discuss the feasibility of alternative solutions.

Reading and analyzing the published case reports led to

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the next step---developing their own cases. In their cases, they were required to describe a particular incident they experienced, discuss the rationale behind their actions and issues remain unsolved. To help them have a focus, I asked them to list three items they had been most concerned with after student teaching in the classroom for a while. The lists they came up with were (1) how to deal with mainstream children in my classroom? (2) how to deal with parents? (3) how to cope with the stormy relationship with my cooperating teacher? (4) how to walk the fine line between being a friend to my students and being an authoritative figure at the same time? The listing helped them find a starting point.

A reflective seminar was scheduled toward the end of the semester for case reports sharing.

Discussions

Each case report was a unique situation that a student teacher found him/herself in while working with children in a regular classroom or with children who were educationally at-risk. The following themes emerged from their case reports: (1) working with learning disabled children in the classroom; (2) disciplining students; (3) involving parents; (4) dealing with my cooperating teacher; (5) exploring effective teaching strategies; (6) moral responsibility.

The themes reflect the common concerns student teachers usually have in the process of their field experience. My student teachers' case reports showed that each of my student teachers

seemed to have gone through the stages of being either shocked, puzzled, lost, or triumphant over his/her experience.

One of them wrote about her experience with a mainstream student:

> "As I look back upon my first reaction to Jane being in a regular classroom, I saw myself lacking experience. I was not qualified to handle a special needs child . . . I was concerned and worried if I could possibly ever meet the needs of this little girl. This girl should be in a special education class . . . ". Nevertheless, the student teacher decided to face the challenge based on her own experience being monitored by her college professors. ". . .I wanted the child to have success in my classes . . . I knew from my professional classes that you take your time with a child until you understand what ability he or she has. I started out by monitoring every type of written work that she did . . . I also dug out the textbook from my Child Development class to refresh my mind on children of special needs . . . I took extra time with Jane when we did a unit on Indians . . . Since Jane was an auditory learner, I read each essay question to her on the unit exam. She got a B. I enjoyed Jane as a challenge in my classroom. I was very pleased how I eased into teaching Jane."(M.B.)

Another student teacher explained her frustrations dealing with an Attention Deficit Disorder student in her class and her anger about feeling incapable.

> "No one has taught me how to deal with an ADD student effectively. Some techniques I learned from my college classes do not help much . . . This student is so overly active, and we are hoping that he will be receiving professional help very soon. he has never had any kind of help like that, and we feel that if he does receive some type of help that things will go more smoothly for him and make his life easier. After all, things like this are not the student's fault . . . I need help!" (N.K.)

Another student teacher expressed her concern about her cooperating teacher's discipline techniques that she did not agree but had no idea how to change the situation. She wrote:

> "Bobby", although small for his age, is an above-average intelligent sixth grade student who grasps on to concepts

quickly. He loves to play on the computer, discover new items under his microscope daily, and takes pride in the projects he accomplishes. He has two wonderful parents who support him with everything he does . . . The problem that I have with him is that he is extremely disorganized! At any given time, his papers are everywhere, his desk is in disarray, he's forgotten his homework assignments, and his shoes need to be tied . . . Each day is just a major battle to get him home in one piece . . . There are many ways that I have tried to help him. The first thing I did (besides constantly reminding him every day) was to move his seat beside a girl who I knew would act as his "mother" and help him throughout the day. This girl did exactly as I had hoped she would, and "Bobby's behavior began to improve. His desk was cleaner, his homework was turned in on time, his shoes were always tied, and he was an all-round happier child. Then he acted out or talked out of turn, and my cooperating teacher put him in the middle of the room by himself, the worst place he could possibly be. Now, without someone harping on him every minute, he regressed back to the way he was. I wanted so badly to put him back with the other students, but how could I go against my cooperating teacher's wishes?. . ." (H.R.)

Concerned with a particular student's welfare, another student teacher described his experience thusly:

". . .I was just beginning my student teaching experience, and above all, I was nervous. There were so many questions going into the first day, and there were no answers in sight. I watched all the students file into the room, and proceed to ask me the usual question of "Who are you?". All except one. I noticed right away one student, Chris, shield away from me and hid. He acted very strangely, and I knew that he was not as open as the other students. I later learned that he had been held back in first grade, and was not sociable in the class. He also did not offer answers or questions, nor wish to participate in class functions. Shortly after my arrival, I realized that this student had some sort of learning problem, and noticed that his work was far behind the others. I tried to give him more opportunities to participate, and show him that I was his friend, and that he should not be afraid. He began to be more open with me and talk frequently with no prompting. It seemed that he was getting better and becoming more involved.

Around mid semester, I noticed Chris becoming distant again. He was almost in a trance most of the time, and seemed to carry around some anger. He would always be looking like he wanted to hit someone, frequently fought with his neighbors, and was doing downhill in his work. I tried to become more individual with him, especially in spelling. His spelling

> was very bad, so I started to make him flash cards, and help him study every day. If he got the word correct, he would get a stamp or star on the card. His goal was to get four stars each week for each word. At first he seemed very interested, but as time grew on, he would lose his words, or forget them repeatedly. Finally, he said he didn't care, and really did not want to get them correct. I was at a loss for ideas that would get him back on track, and interested. The rest of his work seemed steady, but spelling was not on his mind. Recently he has taken an interest in passing, but I will be leaving soon, and I am afraid he will go back into his shell.
>
> . . ." (T.K.)

In the end of most case reports, they raised some very interesting questions such as "I saw a very positive effect of the drug (Ritalin), but I would like to know more about the negative cases and what can be done if it doesn't work. What would be an alternative solution to putting Pat on medication?" "Is there a way to get a totally uninterested student to keep wanting to succeed?" "With something as routine as spelling, how can one person make the individualized effort more interesting?" "There will not always be someone to give the added attention, so did I make things worse by doing this only for limited time?" "How can I restore my confidence in my abilities as a teacher after I was constantly putting down by my cooperating teacher?" "How can I help "Bobby" progress when my cooperating teacher constantly calls attention to his behavior and moves him away from other students, where I feel he needs to be at this time?" etc.

They might not have been able to find an assuring answer to the problems they encountered as they went through the process. However, they made a "reflective turn" at a certain point. Just

as what Schon has pointed out that "in different ways and to varying degrees, . . . by exploring the understandings revealed by the patterns of spontaneous activity that make up their practice. Whenever these patterns appears strange or puzzling, the authors assume that there is an underlying sense to be discovered and that it is their business as researchers to discover it. As a consequence, they are sometimes led to reflect on their own understandings of their subjects' understanding"(Schon, 1991, p. 5).

Recommendations

Due to an unexpected schedule conflict, the sharing seminar was unable to be held. My student teachers lost a very good opportunity to share their cases with each other to confirm or refute their actions. Thus, it is highly recommended that in the future such sessions be conducted and a cohort group in each school setting be formed. By sharing their own cases with each other, they can see problems from different perspectives and get moral support from each other. When student teachers are assigned to their cooperating teachers, they are usually isolated and confined to that particular setting. Oftentimes the frustration level could be so high that they become doubtful about their decision to become a teacher. The form of a cohort group in each school setting enables to provide an outlet for student teachers to share their joys and frustrations, to reconfirm or revise each other's practice of teaching.

Reading and responding to established cases and then learning to develop their own should be "an integral part of preparing student teachers for reality". We'd better start this process earlier by exposing preservice teachers to case methods through seminars at the time when they are admitted into the teacher education program. It takes time and techniques to analyze and write their own cases.

In short, the case methods can help preservice teachers discover what they already understand through preparation courses and know how to do in the classrooms. When they look back what the problem is and how they deal with it they are actually engaging themselves in the process of reflection, which forces them to examine the positive or negative consequences as a result of their action.

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